

四国大学紀要, (A) 47 : 11 – 19, 2016
 Bull. Shikoku Univ. (A) 47 : 11 – 19, 2016

Exploring CLIL Possibilities within the Framework of Foreign Language Education in Japanese Elementary Schools.

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ABSTRACT

English Language Policy in Japan has been under a period of change in recent years. Within the increasingly global society, the Ministry of Education plans to improve and expand foreign language programs at the elementary school level from 2020. Since the implementation of compulsory foreign language activity classes in 2011, the lack of confidence among the teachers responsible for the classes has been an issue. This paper attempts to explore the influences from Europe on government plans for the future whilst exploring the possibilities of applying CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as an approach which may help improve teacher confidence by linking content from other subjects with language classes.

KEYWORDS : CLIL, CEFR, Content, Cognitive, Confidence, Influence.

1.0 Educational Change

In January 2013, Prime Minister Abe's 2nd Cabinet set up the Education Rebuilding Council (ERC, *Kyōiku Saisei Kaigi*), a round-table conference, to propose educational reforms appropriate for Japan in the 21st century. The ERC released its third proposal titled *University Education and Global Human Resource Development for the Future* in May of 2013, which presented a plan for “Enhancing education from the primary and secondary school levels to respond to globalization” (Cabinet, 2013).

Based on this proposal, in December the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced its *Execution Plan to Reform English Education in Response to Globalization* (MEXT, 2013). The government plans to lower the starting age of FLA to the third grade and make English an official subject starting in the fifth grade by 2020. In MEXT's plan, third and fourth grade students would have FLA once a week, and fifth and sixth graders would have English two times a week. This plan is only one part of the government's plan to cultivate global citizens.

1.1 The current Course of Study for elementary schools was implemented in 2011 with weekly classes for fifth and sixth grade students being required, 35 class hours per year, or 70 hours over the two-year period. Classes were to be taught primarily by homeroom teachers, although they were to have the help of assistant language teachers (ALTs), native English speakers from the JET Program and local boards of education, and also local members of the community with English language skills. It is important to note that these were to be considered Foreign Language Activities and not English classes. This distinction is explained in the goals of the Foreign Language Activities outlined in the Course of Study :

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2010)

The goals of FLA are for students to develop communicative ability through experiential learning, and

to experience language and culture while interacting with others. As the activities are not considered official classes, language retention is not one of the goals. MEXT does hope, however, that these activities will have a positive effect on students' oral and aural English abilities.

2.0 Present Issues at Elementary School

At an English teaching seminar in Tokushima in 2013, 147 elementary school teachers were given a survey to assess their general sentiments about teaching English. (Representatives of each elementary school in Tokushima were present at the seminar, although not all participated in the survey.) Survey items were based on initial surveys done in 1997 and 2007. The 2007 survey, in particular, showed a lack of confidence among teachers, with many comments mentioning a lack of English ability, a lack of knowledge in how to use the then course book, *Eigo Note*, and questions about how to plan forty-five minute English classes.

2.1 Having noted that confidence was a serious and continuing problem among elementary school teachers regarding the teaching of English, we (Fennelly, Luxton and Fukuda 2013) decided to ask teachers more directly about their confidence levels. We asked teachers about their confidence, problems in classes, use of the then new course book 'Hi Friends!' and knowledge about teaching a foreign language. A lack of confidence related to both English level and the ability to teach English was perhaps the most obvious finding. Of the 147 teachers surveyed, only 9 % said they were confident in their English teaching abilities, and 72% of respondents said that their English ability was not sufficient to teach English. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers surveyed said that they did not have enough knowledge of how to teach English. Another

significant finding of our survey was the need for more training. In particular, neither the curriculum nor the guidebook seemed to be well understood. For example, only 20% of the teachers surveyed claimed to have a good understanding of the new course of study. Similarly, only 30% said they had confidence in using *Hi, Friends!* A lack of understanding of the curriculum and course book can obviously lead to very serious problems in the future, and both signal the need for further training.

2.2 Our survey also showed that over 30% of teachers were concerned that their team-teaching classes were not going well. Although 30% may not seem significant enough to raise concern, comments from teachers lead us to believe that the problem may be greater than this number suggests. In particular, teachers expressed concern about their ability to communicate with ALTs and about a lack of time for preparing and discussing team-taught classes. Little time for training and not enough time to prepare for team-teaching classes are part of a larger issue: elementary teachers in Japan already feel overworked. We asked the teachers about this specifically. Tellingly, only 2 % said that they disagreed with the statement "teaching English in my classroom is too much of a burden." Japanese elementary school teachers are responsible for everything from classes and extra-curricular activities to cleaning and even the students' lives at home. English classes are an unwelcome burden for many. Overall, our survey results were not encouraging. The teachers clearly lack confidence when it comes to speaking and teaching English, they do not seem to understand the new curriculum very well, and even without English Activity classes added to the schedule, they feel overworked.

2.3 As mentioned above, only about 30 percent of the teachers surveyed said they felt they were using

Hi Friends! effectively. This low number may be attributed to the fact that the goal is not in fact English ability, but the ability to communicate. The new goals stress experience, attitude and communication rather than the concrete goals connected to vocabulary and grammar that most teachers are familiar with. In particular, experts involved in designing the course and book stress one facet of communicative competence known as strategic competence (Oshiro & Naoyama, 2008), which is essentially the ability to compensate when one does not know a specific word or phrase through re-phrasing, gestures and so on (Savignon, 1983). This is meant to improve communication in general as well as create the groundwork for the later acquisition of discourse and grammatical competence. A communicative experiential approach and strategic competence are not concepts that many teachers are familiar with, and it is possible that this is what has led to the teachers' lack of confidence in using *Hi Friends!* It is our opinion that a lack of understanding regarding the main course book for a new program of study clearly implies that additional training is necessary.

3.0 Influence from Europe

Now, I would like to take a look at how recently influence has shifted to that of a globalization of language policy with its roots in Europe. *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) was published in 2001 in both English and French as a contribution to the European year of Languages. Since publication its influence at a global level has been significant and the implications for Japan are considerable.

3.1 Following the Second World War and the birth of the Council of Europe and the EU, there became a greater need for language education to promote *the free movement of people, information*

and ideas in Europe (Byram and Parmentar 2012).

In 1991 an intergovernmental symposium was asked to consider ;

(a) *the introduction of a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for the description of objectives of language learning and teaching, curriculum and design, materials production and language testing and assessment, and*

(b) *the introduction of a European Language Portfolio (ELP), in which individual learners could record not only institutional courses attended and qualifications gained, but also less formal experiences with respect to as wide a range of European languages and cultures as possible.*

(Byram and Parmentar 2012).

3.2 The importance of a framework to mutually recognize qualifications and experience across languages and cultures was stressed. In order to accomplish this the framework was to be comprehensive, transparent and coherent. It is said to be designed to '*Raise awareness of a European identity with shared values and acceptance of cultural and language diversity*' (Nagai and O'Dwyer 2011). In Europe the need for a clear way to compare language skills across languages has led to a globalization of language policy around the world, particularly in the area of evaluation.

Following the CEFR guidelines, language programmes should be action-based, have autonomous outcomes and stress a need for coherent and transparent content and evaluation. *It was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency.* (CEFR 2011)

3.3 The resulting level scale produced with descriptors selected from existing scaling had great impact globally. This reference list, and the accompanying ‘Can-Do’ descriptors or determinators have been adopted in many countries in order to increase transparency and coherence in language goals and evaluation. (Fennelly 2016)

For example, a learner at the Basic User (A) A1 breakthrough level :

Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. (CEFR 2011)

Also a learner at the (B) independent B1 threshold level

Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (CEFR 2011)

And a proficient (C) mastery C2 level learner :

Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning

even in more complex situations. (CEFR 2011)

3.4 Based on these different levels a detailed list of Can-Do descriptors was developed and these have been used to develop materials, assessment and self-assessment tools based on not only what the learners’ resources are (i.e. their strategies and what they know) but also what they can do with them.

Examples from the *Common Reference Levels Self-assessment grid* (CEFR 2001) :

Listening

A1 : *I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.*

C1 : *I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.*

Spoken Production

B2 : *I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.*

3.5 An important aspect of the CEFR globally is that of evaluation. The framework offers an opportunity for students, evaluators or employers to compare different qualifications with a more coherent idea of what that qualification means in real language ability. CEFR based Can-Do lists are now used for the score interpretation of most high-stake English qualification tests in Japan such as TOEIC and Eiken. Runnels(2014a), notes that the Can-Do lists for both are produced through similar empirical studies of test takers concerning what they can do in English

in their daily lives which were administered immediately after taking the tests. This has also led to updates in these ‘high stake’ tests as the tests are adjusted to evaluate in line with what people should be able to do at each level.

CEFR and ‘High Stake’ English Language Tests

CEFR	Eiken	TOEIC	TOEFL Ibt	IELTS
C 2				8.5–9.0
C 1	Grade 1	900	110–120	7.0–7.5
B 2	Grade Pre–1	740	87–109	5.5–6.0
B 1	Grade 2	520	57–86	4.0–4.5
A 2	Grade Pre 2	400	40–56	3.0
A 1	Grade 3–5	365		2.0

Adapted from British Council (2015) and English 4 U (2013)

In recent years the Can–Do descriptor statement associated with the CEFR levels are strongly impacting school language education and Ministry of Education directives (Nagai and O’Dwyer 2011). Runnels (2014a) notes that CEFR has been criticized for not being based on second–language acquisition theory or on performance samples from actual learners, however, she goes on to note the significant impact it has come to have on second language education around the world.

4.0 CEFR in the Education System

As mentioned in Fennelly (2016), Little (2006a) argues that to date the CEFR’s impact on language testing far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy. (Negishi and Tono 2014). Sugitani and Tomita (in Byram and Parmentar 2012) note that in Japan CEFR influences the areas of teaching English as an international language and developing can–do statements, leading to transparency and efficiency, primarily at the tertiary level. They however comment that *there is a need to debate how to contextualize the CEFR structurally in Japan before thinking about the application of can–do statements.*

4.1 Despite a lack of discussion on the philosophy behind and the contextualizing of the CEFR standards for the Japanese educational model, the ‘English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization’, see 1.0 above, gave specific reference to CEFR levels. The plan outlines goals of junior high to be at CEFR levels A 1–A 2 and senior high at levels B 1–B 2.

4.2 The new plan is to be introduced with the new course of study in 2020, to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics. The plan also proposes that Japanese teachers of English should evaluate language skills with the use of ‘Can–Do’ descriptors, and it specifies the attainment target of the Japanese people’s English proficiency in terms of the CEFR levels. Notably mention of the evaluation of performance skills such as spoken English and interaction through performance testing and the use of rubrics. This type of change could lead to a significant change at the classroom level. There are concerns that ‘leaping’ at the can–do statements alone, without understanding of the CEFR philosophies, could lead to a somewhat distorted version of CEFR goals. It is hoped that opportunities for students to be involved in realistic interaction using a foreign language will help the students to develop real communicative skills and not just knowledge about the language which has been the typical mode for evaluation.

4.3 As preparation for the new course of study progresses, reference to Can–Do lists for assessment goal parameters are used across many of the government documents. It is expected that all teachers will be expected to develop curricula and produce teaching plans using Can–Do lists for evaluation and class/ unit goals. This, it is hoped, will make the classes more communicative and provide teachers and students alike with coherent communicative or

interactive goals related to what students can actually do in English rather than simply what they know. The issues mentioned in 2.0 above are areas which need to be addressed if teachers are to confidently implement this new government plans.

5.0 CLIL and Possible Influences

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach which grew in Europe alongside CEFR focusing on both language and content. *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. That is, in the teaching and learning process, there is a focus not only on language, and not only on content. Each is interwoven, even if the emphasis is greater on one or the other at any given time.* (Coyle et al. 2010)

The term CLIL was adopted in Europe in 1994 to describe and design educational practice where teaching and learning take place in a language other than L1. Various language teaching methodologies are used to give attention to both language and content.

Achieving this twofold aim calls for the development of a special approach to teaching in that the non-language subject is not taught in a foreign language but with and through a foreign language. (Eurydice 2006)

5.1 CLIL is underlined by the framework of what is known as the 4 Cs (Coyle 2007, Coyle et al. 2010, Mehisto et al. 2008, Ikeda 2011). The 4 Cs refer to Content, Communication, Cognition and Community or Culture.

5.11 Content

Content refers to the subject matter itself, which by nature will be new to the students, putting language in context and creating a real need to communicate and real content goals. In CLIL, the context is not entirely familiar to the student. There is a genuine communicative need for students to find out the new information.

5.12 Communication

Communication refers to students using the target language to communicate their thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and discoveries related to the lesson content. Both speaking and writing are emphasized as students “learn to use language and use language to learn”. (Coyle)

Communication involves :

Language *of* learning ; the language needed to learn the content material.

Language *for* learning ; the language needed to participate in class

Language *through* learning ; the language that emerges naturally in the classroom.

In a CLIL class, students would engage in meaningful interaction with each other and group work would be very common. The aim is for students to produce authentic language, not to memorize grammar rules or simply repeat after or copy the teacher. The teacher would serve as guide or facilitator

5.13 Cognition

Cognition refers to the critical thinking skills that students use to engage with and understand course content, to solve problems, and to reflect on their learning. (Coyle, et al. 2010, Mehisto et al. 2008)

Yamano (2015) notes *CLIL uses Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) division of Bloom's taxonomy into lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order*

thinking skills (HOTS). LOTS involve memory, comprehension, and application. HOTS incorporate analysis, evaluation and creation (Coyle et al. 2010, Ikeda 2011).

5.14 Culture

Culture (also known as community and citizenship) refers to the learning community of a class and school and more broadly to local and global cultures. Students are encouraged to understand themselves as citizens of the world and understand both their own culture and other cultures. The ultimate goal is to promote international awareness and understanding through awareness of self and others.

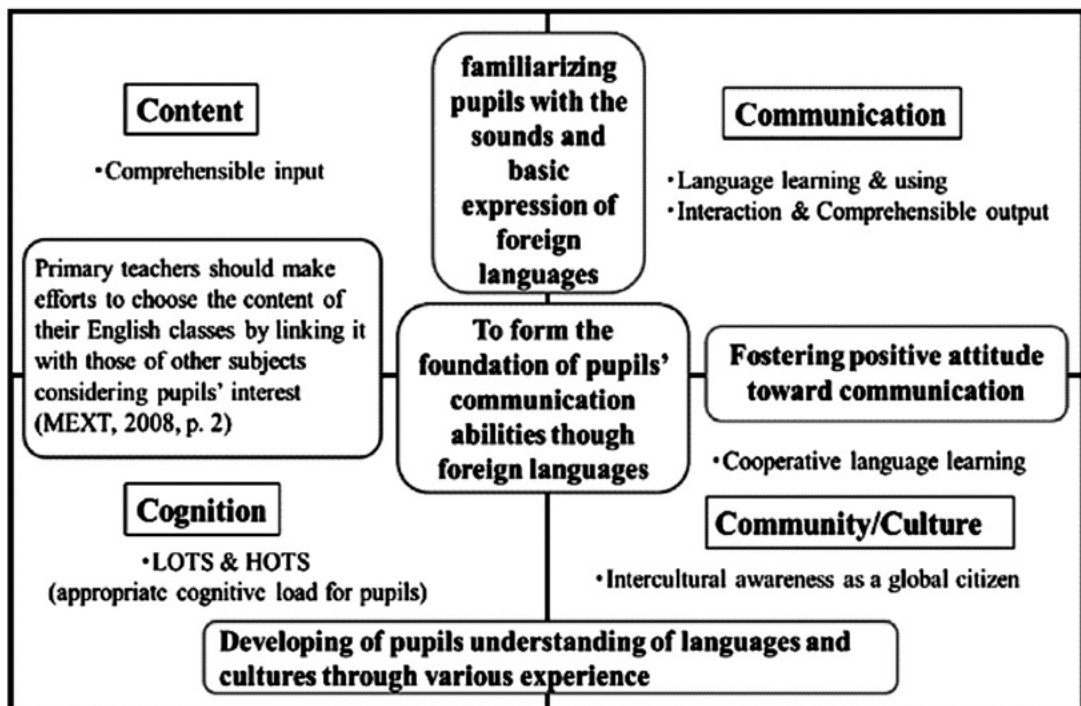
5.2 Different kinds of CLIL

CLIL techniques can be applied in a numerous variety of ways in diverse circumstances. Example of CLIL may be on the following scales (Ikeda 2011).

Soft (Language education) _____
 Hard (Content /Subject Education) _____
 Light (Individual classes/sporadic) _____
 Heavy (Regular and Often) _____
 Partial (One part of Class) _____
 Total (Entire class) _____
 Bilingual (L 1 and L 2) _____
 Monolingual (L 2 only) _____

As Yamano (2013) notes, the integration of language learning and content learning can help develop student's interest, cognitive development co-operative learning and cross-cultural understanding which seems to represent government plans for elementary school foreign language education.

Yamano (2015) notes the relation between MEXT goals for Foreign Language Activities (FLA) at the elementary school level and CLIL. She notes that the government plans recommend the utilization of



CLIL and Elementary School FLA in Japan Yamano (2015)

subject content from other classes within the FLA framework to stimulate student interest. This, Yamano (2015), research noted and increase in teacher confidence through use of CLIL principles. This may suggest that the issues addressed in 2.0 above could be addressed to some extent through introduction of CLIL.

As CLIL lessons have both language and content aims and homeroom teachers in Japan lack confidence with language skills at present, linking with content material could help, not only increase student interest, but also help to develop teacher confidence whilst teaching content material they are familiar with.

In a CLIL class the use of known language, familiar context and visual aids all provide scaffolding to support the teaching of new language and content. As Allan Gordon of the British Council (2013) notes, using English as a medium for teaching other subjects gives learners a genuine communicative need. We can teach a lot with even a little language and with sufficient training, it is believed that teachers can apply their limited language ability to the content which they are very familiar with in order to stimulate learners' interest in the lesson.

6.0 Conclusion

With Japan on the verge of a further step toward increased language study at the elementary school and of English becoming an official subject at that level, the issues raised in 2.0 above such as lack of language ability or teaching experience and a lack of confidence are areas that need to be addressed more seriously. Other than improved language programs for future teachers at this level, the author believes that application of CLIL principles may help address some of the issues of confidence. By

giving teachers the opportunity to access content with which they are confident and familiar within their language classes, could, with suitable training, help teachers become more confident. Early studies by Yamano (2013, 2015) would suggest that teachers who have experienced CLIL and undergone Cognitive change in their own right, have gained in confidence as teachers. To what extent these classes would have to rely on Bi-lingual CLIL and/or code switching is an area for future thought. Future studies, it is hoped will give more insight into the relationships between CLIL principles, content, language and teacher confidence at the classroom level.

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